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Critical Factors for Academic and Familial Development of Eritrean Refugee Children in Switzerland: A Mixed-Methods Study

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ABSTRACT

People from Eritrea are currently the largest group of recognized refugees in Switzerland; many of them have small children under 6 years of age. In the next few years, thousands of children will start school. The specific social, cultural, and familial background, sometimes in combination with traumatizing experiences during the journey to Switzerland, might be challenging for school staff and peers regarding integration into the new country, culture, and academic system. The current study aimed to find predictors and determinants of academic success and adjustment. Official data were analyzed, complemented by an ethnographic approach to elucidate family mechanisms that could influence the family's and children's well-being and academic success. Eritrean children are underprivileged in the Swiss academic system compared to Swiss students and even to children from other trouble spot countries. Proactivity and future orientation of the mothers seem to help Eritrean children to interact with their life situation and strengthen the whole family, whereas absent fathers, isolated mothers, and discontinuity in the family history weaken the families and their well-being.

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About 30,000 people of Eritrean origin live in Switzerland (Statista, 2023a). Between January and August 2015, a peak season, 110,000 migrants arrived in southern Italy after traveling across the Mediterranean Sea from Libya (UNHCR, 2015), more than twice as many as in 2013. Although the numbers have decreased since 2015, when 9,950 applications were made, in 2023, there were still 8,868 people from Eritrea in the asylum process (Statista, 2023b), partly having an unclear asylum status.

Eritrean people in the Zurich region

In January 2022, 4,675 recognized Eritrean people were living in the Canton of Zurich (Statista, 2023c); most of them have a visa status that allows them to stay in Switzerland, allowing them a long-term perspective. In contrast to other groups in the Zurich region, they are very young. The vast majority, more than 90%, is between 21 and 39 years old, and they have a remarkable number of small children under 6 years old, mostly born in Switzerland. Compared to this huge number, there are only a few Eritrean youth (13–20 years old) or people more than 40 (Widmer & Schmutz, 2013; see Figure 1).

Eritrean parallel society in Swiss exile

One reason for unsatisfactory integration and an Eritrean parallel society in Switzerland can be seen in the transnational functioning of the Eritrean state and its governmental operations. After Eritrea declared its independence from Ethiopia after a long war from Sept 1, 1961, to May 29, 1991, the

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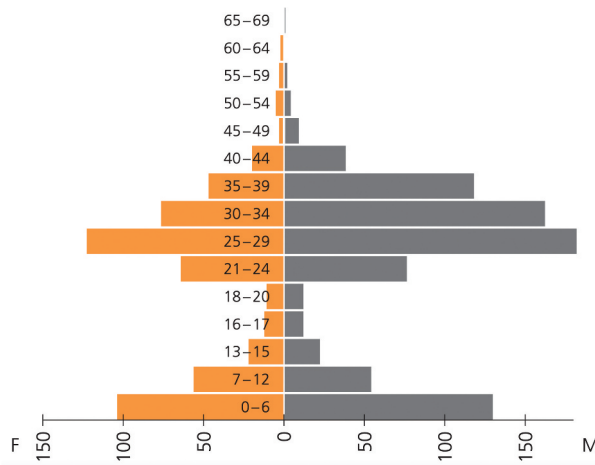


Figure 1. Age pyramid of the permanent resident population from Eritrea in the Canton of Zurich in 2011 (left: women; right: men; retrieved from Widmer & Schmutz, 2013, p. 2).

former guerilla warriors and new state leaders adapted social and behavioral norms and mechanisms of control and implemented them into the new society. The high degree of mutual social control stabilizes the government. This social pressure is even present in Switzerland for Eritreans who left their country and wanted to escape their government's influence. Spreading suspicions, rumors, and scare tactics are parts of social surveillance mechanisms (Kavish, 2014). Violating rules is punished by social isolation, even in exile (Glatthard, 2012). Also, due to a rather difficult housing situation for refugees (Doust Mohammadi et al., 2024), which is also a problem in Switzerland, many Eritreans may end up living in the same neighborhood (Stern et al., 2015). Nevertheless, there seems to be a deep political divide among Eritreans in Switzerland (Stern, 2015), which makes it difficult to establish new contacts. Attempts to establish an independent Eritrean community outside Eritrea are undermined by governmental institutions (Kavish, 2014). Eritreans living outside the country must pay a 2% "diaspora tax" in Eritrea, which they failed to fight against (Hirt, 2015). If they have acquaintances, they are usually found within the Eritrean community, but most Eritreans only meet for worship and generally live relatively socially isolated lives (Stern et al., 2015; Zürich, 2022).

In recent years, new conflicts have arisen between Eritreans who have recently left their country and Eritreans who have been living in Switzerland for some time. Although some people living outside Eritrea seem to have made their peace with politics and even support the Eritrean regime, the newly arrived refugees have a very different opinion, leading to conflicts that are even played out in public and frighten other people in Switzerland (Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2024).

Integration into the Swiss society

To understand how refugee youth succeed in building a new future in their host country, it is essential to consider the psychosocial factors that contribute to their successful integration. Research has shown that social inclusion and well-being play a crucial role in the initial years of resettlement for refugee youth (Correa-Velez et al., 2010). Furthermore, the use of social media and mobile applications has been demonstrated to foster constructive interactions and support networks for recently arrived refugees, which can facilitate their successful integration (Pottie et al., 2020). Also, the psychosocial needs of refugee children and youth, including mental well-being or therapy (Chernet et al., 2021) and social support, are critical factors in their ability to thrive in their new environment (McDiarmid et al., 2021; Nakeyar et al., 2017). Education also plays a significant role in the successful integration of refugee youth. Inclusive educational

institutions can facilitate their transition, provide support for their aspirations for the future (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012), and establish relationships with peers. Children who have experienced trauma or adverse circumstances may have a more complex path to building a stable and coherent sense of self.

Moreover, the generational transmission of a decisive past among Eritrean diaspora youth emphasizes the intergenerational aspects of identity formation and how historical narratives shape children's understanding of their cultural heritage and roots (Graf & Thieme, 2016). Family histories and collective memories play a significant role in shaping children's identities and sense of belonging. Employment and education are also pivotal for successful integration. Limited work opportunities can affect the transition into adulthood, and factors influencing education and employment outcomes among refugee youth need to be carefully considered (Shand et al., 2020; Ziaian et al., 2019). Furthermore, the preventive role of a psychosocial safety climate against school harassment and discrimination is essential for refugee youth to thrive in their new environment (Afsharian et al., 2021; Zürich, 2022).

Despite the positive impact of being employed (often within work-integration programs), in 2021, more than 85% of Eritreans living in Switzerland were depending on social welfare (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2021). Other problems, like unsatisfactory language skills, psychological stress, traumatization, vulnerability, and a life socially rather isolated or within an Eritrean parallel society, add to this phenomenon (Lubos, 2014; Stern et al., 2015). Moreover, many Eritreans seem to be very suspicious of the Swiss governmental authorities, including the welfare offices (Schöb, 2013), and, for example, cannot understand why a pregnant neighbor does not get a bigger apartment (Schöb, 2013), organized and paid for by the welfare office. In Eritrea, the people have little choice regarding housing; most facilities are allocated by the governmental authorities.

It seems that the Swiss social services have difficulty communicating their role and responsibilities clearly so that possible false expectations of their Eritrean clients would decrease (Stern et al., 2015). Also, the prevailing image of Eritreans in Swiss society can be an obstacle to integration. For example, the Eritreans are perceived as having a different skin color and thus stand out, especially in smaller cities (ibid.). This can lead to conflicts and misunderstandings when refugees are perceived as immobile and passive while they must wait for their work permit, a job interview, their language class to start, etc., (Cangia et al., 2021), which can be frustrating for the refugees (ibid.). Not understanding the refugees' situation and their "condition migrante" (Lanfranchi, 2015, p. 22) often leads to frustration for everyone involved. A natural skepticism and resistance toward suggestions made by teachers or the social service thus can be interpreted as stubbornness and manifest prejudice (ibid.).

It can also happen, partly due to difficulties finding accommodation, that agglomerations of Eritreans in individual districts emerge. This, in turn, can lead to other residents of the community avoiding that area and the Eritrean population becoming isolated (Stern et al., 2015). Feeling rejected by the mainstream culture can lead to ethnic self-hate and result in passivity, depression, and substance use (Pumariega et al., 2005), especially among children and adolescents.

The rather young Eritreans living in Switzerland do not have their parents' generation living with them in Switzerland. Regarding information, counseling, and guidance, they often hope that social services will bridge this gap. Many Eritreans have been living in a totalitarian regime since they were young and are not used to making their own decisions about housing, education, etc. So, to a certain degree, they expect a similar kind of public provision from the Swiss government (i.e., social services) (Schöb, 2013).

In addition, psychological distress during the long journey from Eritrea to Switzerland and sometimes traumatic experiences can hinder integration efforts (Melamed et al., 2019) and make it difficult to learn a new language or profession (Doust Mohammadi et al., 2024). Also, after a difficult journey to Switzerland, many arrivals from Eritrea are exhausted. They need time to recover, possibly with professional therapeutic help, before they succeed after their challenging and strenuous integration process (Stern et al., 2015), which can be misunderstood as being passive or unmotivated (Cangia et al., 2021).

Finally, patriarchal family systems and authoritarian parenting practices are obstacles to integration and sometimes result in conflicts with the schools (Stern et al., 2015). Because many fathers feel weakened in their authority as fathers, they do not engage in contact with the government or the public service, leading to a kind of isolation of the family from the public and community opportunities. This phenomenon has already been described among Ethiopian fathers who emigrated to Israel. The need to acquire another language upon emigration and the fathers' lack of understanding of the system exacerbated their loss of authority (Roer-Strier et al., 2005). Some interviewees in Israel attributed the decline in fathers' central authority in the family to the changes in the division of labor in the traditional family that occurred upon emigration.

Fleeing from Eritrea to Switzerland initiates a complex process of identity formation influenced by various factors. The experiences of second-generation Eritreans in Switzerland highlight the significance of trans-local encounters with new generations of refugees from Eritrea in shaping their identities (Graf & Thieme, 2016). The interplay between the past, present, and transnational experiences forms the foundation upon which these children build their sense of self and belonging. These experiences of displacement, together with the need to adapt to a new culture and society, significantly affect how these children perceive themselves and their place in the world (Socha et al., 2016). In the context of migration and identity, the study on second-generation Serbian migrants in Switzerland emphasizes the influence of transnational norms and behaviors on identity formation (Todorović, 2019). The norms and practices of transnational communities are often internalized by children of migrants, influencing their conceptualization of self and sense of belonging. Especially in the sensitive phase of youth, in which building their own identity and relationships with peers become more important, it is a violent break when the family decides to flee to another country. Adolescents suffer not only from their losses but also from the destabilization of the family structures and of the parents being mentally challenged and thus possibly unresponsive to a certain degree (Lubos, 2014). As to the children and young people of Eritrean origin born in Switzerland, it was observed that the new arrival of migrants from Eritrea contributes to a rather hybrid Swiss-Eritrean identity in the second generation who have not lived in Eritrea themselves (Graf & Thieme, 2016). Also, the role of schools and teachers of refugee youths is crucial for their successful integration (McDiarmid et al., 2021). Taken together, migration challenges the whole family system over the generations.

The academic situation of children with a migration background

Children with migration backgrounds are often subject to discrimination within the Swiss education system (Coradi Vellacott, 2007; Moser & Lanfranchi, 2008). The ratio of children who attend special needs classes with a special curriculum serves as an indicator. Whereas approximately 2% of Swiss children are allocated to such settings, 8% of children of foreign origin are found there (separate language classes for newly immigrated children not included). Their numbers are rising, and a turnaround is not yet in sight. According to the calculations of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office, the ratio of foreigners in regular classes was 24.3% and 43.4% in classes with a special curriculum. A similar overrepresentation is found in certain cities like Zurich: 24.5% of the foreigners in regular classes, 52.6% in special classes, and only 9.8% in secondary schools (Lanfranchi, 2016). Reasons for this high separation rate are lack of resources; familial reasons like beliefs and interpretation patterns of the parents, who are often not familiar with the Swiss education system and its specific requirements (e.g., to be on time every day) (Stern et al., 2015); and sometimes lack of a strong academic background due to manifold reasons, language problems (ibid., Schöb, 2013), and possible negative assumptions of teachers (Jussim & Harber, 2005).

Facing these barriers, huge attempts to improve this situation by the education agency have been undertaken, including educating teachers of asylum classes more specifically; working together with social agencies, the local school districts, and volunteers in education; and taking into consideration the heterogeneity of students, multilingualism in the classroom, and different mental health status of the students forming an asylum class (Zürich, 2022).

This includes training educational staff about trauma and possible secondary traumatization mechanisms (ibid.). It is suspected that about 40% of refugee children in Switzerland suffer from post-traumatic problems (Lubos, 2014). In residential areas with a high proportion of foreign citizens, there are also more and more additional services, such as children and youth centers with homework help, daycare structures at school, reading promotion projects, and parent-child courses, that aim to make integration easier for the children and their families (ibid.).

Eritrean children in the Swiss academic system

Eritrean parents seem to be suspicious when it comes to communicating with official authorities, so from an official point of view, they stay invisible (Schöb, 2013), making it difficult to include Eritrean families in prevention projects. For financial reasons, Eritrean toddlers attend early childhood education institutions only rarely (e.g., daycare or playgroups). The families often live in temporary homes for years with only limited possibilities to meet German-speaking children, meaning that they must learn German quickly when they start kindergarten or primary school. This often leads to an unfavorable situation and future academic difficulties, especially when the family depends on welfare and the parents are not well educated themselves.

At the same time, Eritrean parents have ambitious plans and academic expectations for their children (Eyer & Schweizer, 2010). Parents wish them to achieve the highest academic degrees in university, even though the parents do not know a lot about the Swiss academic system, the different types of schools, and their requirements. According to Widmer and Schmutz (2013), they take an active role and would appreciate daycare and similar settings where their children can learn German easily. Education is seen as the most legitimate instrument to secure and advance their social status in immigration societies (Schnell et al., 2015). Widmer and Schmutz (ibid.) also report that the collaboration between Swiss teachers and Eritrean parents is mostly going well; teachers have to deal with especially difficult children or families in only some cases. In contrast (Schöb, 2013), Eritrean children may stand out in schools because of behavior problems.

In conclusion, the successful integration of refugee children in their new country is influenced by a multitude of factors, including social inclusion, mental well-being, education, employment opportunities, and community support. Understanding and addressing these factors are crucial for facilitating successful integration into their new environment.

The current study followed both a quantitative and descriptive approach to evaluate the academic situation of Eritrean children in Swiss schools compared to children of other nationalities and a qualitative, explorative approach to explore key factors for child and family development of Eritrean children living in Switzerland. The research question addresses whether there are specific barriers and facilitators to integration present in the intrafamilial dynamics of Eritrean families.

Methods

Quantitative analysis of the academic situation of Eritrean children according to the education authority of the Canton Zurich was followed by narrative family interviews with five Eritrean families living in the Zurich area. The families were selected following a contrasting protocol according to the academic success and struggles of one of the children (Hildenbrand, 2005). This selection was based on theoretical considerations as well as evidence from the literature and statistics on the learning success of children from Eritrea in the Swiss school system. Families were recruited with the help of an Eritrean psychiatrist who is highly respected and well connected in the Eritrean community in Switzerland. Minimal contrast: family from Eritrea, in Switzerland for less than 10 years, no higher education, but possibly interested in education, low socio-economic status, no or limited employment, dependent on care, children without obvious mental, physical, hearing, or visual impairment. Maximum contrast: school success of the children (achieve the teaching objectives according to the

curriculum vs. exempt from teaching objectives and separated or integrated with special educational support).

All intended families agreed to be interviewed. They were visited at their homes by two researchers together and were asked about their family history and the children's situation at school. All methods used were carried out according to the ethical guidelines of the Swiss Psychologic Society, which are based on the American Psychological Association Ethics Code and the ethical guidelines of the German Psychological Society and the Professional Association of German Psychologists (Swiss Psychological Society, 2003). The mothers of the families gave informed consent for them and their children to be interviewed. Each interview began with the invitation, "Please tell us about your family and your life in Eritrea." Other stimulating questions were as follows: "How did you come to Switzerland?" and "How is your situation at the moment?" Within this open interview framework, the interviewees decided how detailed they would answer. The interviewers asked additional questions for clarification, where necessary. In sum, 8 hours of interviews were collected; one family (Elsa) was visited twice because the first interview was conducted at a psychiatrist's office with Elsa and her mother alone, with her siblings missing, for reasons of trust. After the first interview, the mother agreed to be visited at her home. Additionally, field notes and pictures of the houses from outside and their apartments were taken if the mothers agreed. All persons belonging to the household were present during the interview.

Quantitative analyses

A descriptive evaluation of the school situation of Eritrean children was made based on statistical data from the Department of Education of the Canton of Zurich, which is publicly available (Department of Education, n.d.). Analyses included the extent to which Eritrean children are educated at the same school levels as their peers by comparative percentages regarding school type and level, allocation to special education, and ratio of class repetition compared to students of Swiss and other nationalities.

Qualitative data compilation

After each interview, the conversation recorded on audio media was transcribed in full by one of the two interviewers, and both interviewers wrote an observation protocol. The objective, largely interpretation-free social biographical data were compiled and supplemented in a genogram for each family (e.g., Figures 4 and 5). The data obtained from the family interviews represent a historical framework of evolved contexts. They served to develop initial hypotheses, which were validated, refined, or falsified in the next step by analyzing the interaction protocols.

Qualitative analyses

Familiarization with the interview material was ensured through repeated and careful readings by the two interviewers, who also analyzed the material. From these materials, short family portraits and genograms over three generations were made. The qualitative analysis of the materials followed the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1973), the Objective Hermeneutics (Oevermann et al., 1979) and the framework analysis (Gale et al., 2013), and the combination of all methods (Hildenbrand, 2005, 2010).

Based on theoretical sampling, a first case was selected and reconstructed in its specific case structure; then a second case was determined, which represents a maximum contrast to the first and is analyzed independently of it in its case structure. The procedure is continued until the theory to be developed is saturated. For the sequence analysis and case structure hypothesis, the social biographical data were first analyzed sequentially using the genogram and reconstructed in terms of their specific case structure laws. In a second step, an initial case structure hypothesis was tested (again using sequence analysis) with the material of the transcribed interview.

In the sequence analysis as the core of case-reconstructive research (Maiwald, 2005), the first question is what meaning the text passage in question could have regardless of the real context. To answer this question, experiments were used to formulate contexts “in which the text appears well-formed” (Wernet, 2000). Only after this “context-independent explication of meaning” (ibid, p. 90.) has been undertaken is the actual context included. In the genogram, the family’s scope for decision-making (e.g., “Who could the man marry in this specific situation?”) is thus compared with the decisions actually made. Thus, a decision-making pattern is obtained, which, on the background of the decision-making possibilities, reveals the particularity of the case as a specific selection process. This decision pattern forms the case structure hypothesis of the family, which is then analyzed in the context of the further material.

For the interpretation of all primary data (genograms, interview transcripts, observation protocols), this sequential analysis based on objective hermeneutics was employed (Maiwald, 2005). Hypotheses were also drawn from these materials and tested for each family, leading to more general conclusions for all families. According to Hildenbrand (2005), analyses were guided by the following principles: (1) The individual case (with its biography, living environments, constructs of reality, and choices) is regarded as an independent unit of analysis; (2) it is understood dialectically as an individuated general; (3) the analysis of individual cases takes time and therefore requires relief from the pressure to act; and (4) for the interpretation of individual cases, and thus for the development of a case structure, the tools of the trade must not be underestimated. Interview data were coded according to specific topics that were addressed by all families, like living in Eritrea, the journey to Switzerland, religion, family structure, health, coping, social support, and problems. After that, an analytical framework was developed using Microsoft Excel, and the data were charted into the framework. Finally, data were synthesized, and conclusions were drawn regarding each topic (e.g., regarding family structure: which structure seems to be beneficial for the well-being of the family, which family structure seems to be challenging?).

Results

Quantitative analyses: Academic success

Quantitative analyses of the academic situation of Eritrean children according to data from the education authority of Canton Zurich revealed the following differences: The ratio of Eritrean children who are educated in special schools (3.8%) is significantly higher than the ratio in the Swiss population of students (1.2%). Eritrean students repeat classes more often (1.6%) than Swiss students do (1.4%). They are also overrepresented in the percentage of children who are educated with a special curriculum and get assistance from special education teachers in regular schools (4.0% Eritreans, 1.1% Swiss). The same pattern is found regarding secondary school: children from Switzerland, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Ethiopia attend secondary school more often than children from Eritrea. Eritreans also have the lowest ratio regarding the best type of secondary school, Level A (Figure 2).

Qualitative analyses: Description of the sample

- (1) Elsa¹ attends a private special school (interviewed twice) (16 y.) in Switzerland for 3 years and lives with her mother and three of her five siblings. She is the second youngest.
- (2) Samuel (15 y.) attends secondary school, came to Switzerland 7 years ago, and lives with his mother and his two younger brothers; his younger sister lives in Eritrea.
- (3) Thomas (3 y.), inconspicuous development, born in Switzerland, lives with his mother and his older sister.
- (4) Noah (3 y.), developmentally delayed, born in Switzerland, lives with both parents and his younger brother.

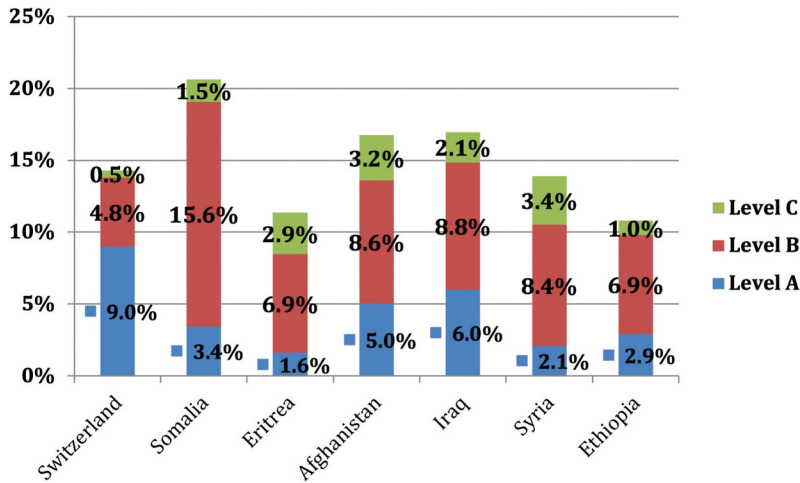


Figure 2. Ratio of students in the lower secondary level with performance-based levels in Switzerland by nation, 2015 (A = high, B = medium, C = low level [Swiss Education Ministry, 2024]).

- (5) Daniela (12 y.), 6th grade, has psychological problems and might be referred to a special school soon, in Switzerland for 4 years, lives with her mother and her three older siblings.

The mothers all together have 18 children, 15 of them living in Switzerland with them and some siblings. All mothers report the great influence of the military in Eritrea as their specific reason for flight, affecting the generations of their fathers, partners, and children.

Origin of the children

Elsa was born in Saudi Arabia, where all her siblings also were born. She lived in Asmara, the Eritrean capital, from 5 to 13 years of age and came to Switzerland then. Samuel lived in Eritrea until he was 5 years old; then the family moved to Sudan. One year later, his parents left for Europe with him and left his younger sister with their aunt and grandmother. He lived in Malta for 2 years and 7 months before his family came to Switzerland; he then was 9 years old. Thomas and Noah never lived in Eritrea; they were born in Switzerland. Daniela also never lived in Eritrea, she was born in Sudan, and then lived in Cairo, Egypt, for almost 4 years, between 4 and 8 years of age. When she was 8 years old, her mother moved to Switzerland with Daniela and her three siblings. Almost all interviewed children were born outside Eritrea. Of 18 children in total, only Elsa and Samuel know Eritrea from their own experience. In four out of five families, the family was formed abroad (Saudi Arabia (Elsa), Sudan (Daniela), Switzerland (Thomas, Noah)). Only Samuel and his first younger sister were born in Eritrea.

Absent fathers

In 80% of the families of our sample, the father is not living with the family any more and was not present during the family interview. The fathers in our sample have moved to live with new partners or their wives expelled them because of severe alcohol problems or domestic violence. One father did not come to Switzerland with his family at all; he stayed in Eritrea, where he owns a business. In one family, the biological father broke up with the mother after he was informed about her pregnancy; they never lived together as a family. Two fathers were thrown out by their wives after having lived together in Switzerland at the beginning. Only one father still lives together with his family. Samuel's mother mentioned that this is widely seen in Eritrean families in Switzerland; she guesses in 60% of the families (line 477).

Social integration

Only Samuel's and Daniela's families mention private contacts, who they call friends. The other mothers report that they have no informal contact with people from their new neighborhood or no contact at all, except with their children (Elsa's mother) or husband and children (Noah's mother). Elsa's mother says that she knows people in the church, though. However, she only knows them by sight; they greet each other, and there are no other encounters. Noah's father seems rather suspicious of contact with people who do not belong to the family, be they Swiss or Eritrean or of other nationalities, and prefers not to make any hasty contacts. Daniela's mother, on the other hand, talks about friends from the church, including a woman from Tibet. Elsa, her siblings, and Samuel say they have a few colleagues at school or in the sports club.

Taken together, most mothers interviewed lack informal opportunities for social exchange. There are no relatives nearby and social support and informal exchange of information seem difficult for them.

Because of the absent fathers, four out of six mothers in our sample are single mothers with two to four children (from toddlers to teenagers). They are dependent on themselves and have no support from their parents or an extended family system as they would usually have in Eritrea. Some are afraid about being spied on by other Eritreans, of the Eritrean regime they originally fled from, so they avoid any further contact with compatriots. They seem even more vulnerable than their children who go to school and connect with other children there; they mostly report making friends quickly. On the other hand, mothers can build resilience when they persevere in these difficult circumstances and grow stronger.

Activity or passivity

Keeping in mind the importance of an actively communicating mother, it is not surprising that Noah is the Eritrean child in our sample with the largest developmental challenges. His mother in general seemed to be very passive. When she talked about her coming to Switzerland, she was not able to take responsibility for her own past experience. She did not know to which city in Switzerland she had been flown by her human trafficker. Also, she told us she was sitting on a train with him somewhere in Switzerland, not knowing where they planned to go. When she was left on this train alone after the trafficker fled, she did not talk to anyone; she waited until some other traveler on that train brought her to a refugee welcome center. "Yes, I have speak with a man, he Swiss, a man, and he said "Why you . . ." because I was wearing an old dress and then I was – the man know my . . . , I was new and he says, "Why you drive alone here for long time?" and I said, "I don't know, I am where?" (lines 749–753). Discussing activity or passivity, it is important to note that taking action to leave a country already is an active measure to improve one's situation (Lanfranchi, 2004) and that freezing can be a functional survival strategy during or after traumatization. Also, trauma can result in passivity (Cangia et al., 2021; Pumariega et al., 2005).

Samuel's mother clearly can be seen as the most active of these five women. She also is the only one with an income, she works part-time, and she was the only one who mentioned meeting with her children's teachers regularly. Samuel is only going to the lowest secondary school type in terms of performance; she attributes this to his difficulties learning German at the beginning, which seemed to be easier for his younger brothers. Moreover, she says that, in contrast to her, almost all other Eritrean mothers in Switzerland were "lazy" and would not care enough for their family's well-being and their children's (academic) future but lament a lot.

Only one of the two toddlers in our sample is developed typically for his age. The three teenagers had or still have substantial problems with their linguistic and social integration at school but are attending schools where they feel comfortable now. Daniela's and Elsa's siblings mainly do not report problems at school, only Daniela's oldest brother Elijah would rather attend a secondary school level A instead of level B.

Samuel's mother suffered domestic violence for more than 3 years. She did not mention any of this when living in Africa: "Almost three years, he bad, beats me, sometimes is not normal, these three years feel like 30 years for me" (line 255). After he had threatened her with a knife, she expelled him. Generally, she seems to be very proactive. When the family moved to the apartment where they live now, she joined a church in the neighborhood, although she did not know enough German yet to meet people. Moreover, she stayed in contact with a fellow Eritrean traveler she had met on her journey to Switzerland. He lives in Ireland now, but she already has planned for him to come to Switzerland to be a new father for her four children. "He has an interest in children, for my children that is better. I have seen it, it is better. Many people saw. . . is better for my children. Simply a man, but bad for my children, what can I do then?" (lines 399–403). This attitude was also evident when she ran her own hairdresser's shop for 5 years in Eritrea and took care of her children.

Thomas' mother told us about serious difficulties during her journey to Switzerland. She still often ruminates about these horrible memories and seems to be very burdened. Her family is scattered; one sister "went away, nobody knows where she is" (line 177). Another sister lives in Israel after she had "big trouble" during her journey through the Sinai; she might have experienced rape, torture, or organ trafficking (CNN Freedom Project, 2012). Another fact that might have led to her rather suspicious attitude is that both fathers of her two children broke up with her after they learned about her pregnancy.

Noah's mother also did not have an easy journey to Switzerland. She came by plane from Sudan with a trafficker who traveled with her and told the authorities that she was his wife: "dangerous, very dangerous and, yes, with man, another man is. . . (laughs). . . difficult" (line 695). Possibly, she suffered sexual assault, too, in addition to her difficult situation of traveling with and being at the mercy of a trafficker.

Daniela's mother stresses how difficult it was to live all alone with four children for 8.5 years already in Egypt, where they lived before they came to Switzerland. Now, she seems afflicted with several problems. For every new topic we addressed, she found many things to be concerned about: "Whole house very bad was, we worked a lot" (line 94). She regrets that she moved from Egypt to Switzerland. In Egypt, all four children were successful academically. They have no contact with their father although the purpose of moving to Switzerland was to live together as a family again after almost 9 years of separation. Thomas' mother was in a similar situation 1 year before but can emphasize the positive things in her life again and face the future.

All families lived in several different places after they had arrived in Switzerland; we met all of them in their second or third homes within only a few years. All five told us that they attend a church regularly, either an Eritrean assembly or the local protestant church. Religion seems to be important to them.

Taken together, the mothers seem to play a crucial role in the thriving of their families. The families' interaction with other people, like Swiss authorities, acquaintances, and friends, seems to be important for the children's development and academic success.

(Pro-)activity and future orientation

As a first conclusion, it seems that the family's interaction with other people is crucial. A certain degree of activity in terms of an external locus of control (see [Figure 3](#)) seems to be essential for their integration as well as for the development of their children. By their activity or passivity level and orientation either to the future or the past, the mothers not only influence their current family life but also are role models for their children. A certain level of (pro-)activity and future orientation seems to be more beneficial than a past orientation and/or passivity and an important resource for the family's well-being.

[Figure 3](#) illustrates the different interaction patterns of the mothers. According to our model, the best prognosis for integration into Swiss society and academic success can be given to Samuel's mother, who has a future orientation as well as an active interaction model, whereas Noah's mother seems to be trapped in her passivity.

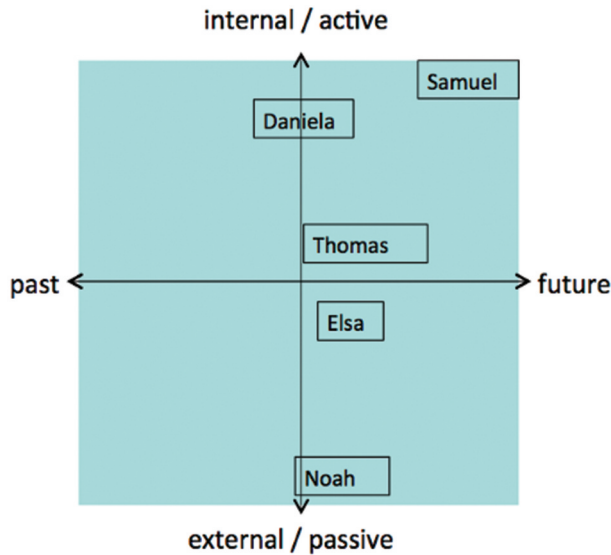


Figure 3. The Eritrean mothers between past – future, and activity – passivity.

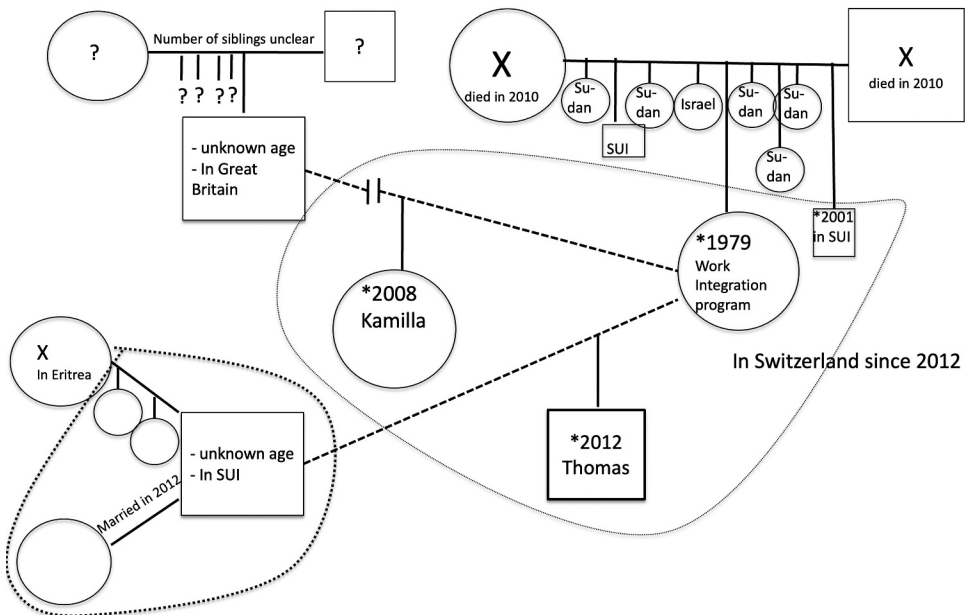


Figure 4. Family genogram of Thomas' family. SUI = Switzerland. circle: feminine person; square: masculine person; dotted circles: living in the same household; dotted lines: former relationship.

Discontinuity in the family history

All mothers have between three and nine siblings, who mainly live outside Eritrea. In many families, one person of a family is living in one country on their own. At least one of the mother's siblings stayed in Eritrea with the parents. All five mothers have had very eventful lives since they left Africa. They left Eritrea when they were teenagers (Noah's mother at age 23). Besides Elsa's mother, who emigrated to Saudi Arabia, all mothers went to Sudan first. All weddings (Thomas' mother was never married) took place in a foreign country outside Eritrea (Saudi Arabia or Sudan) and many of the children were not

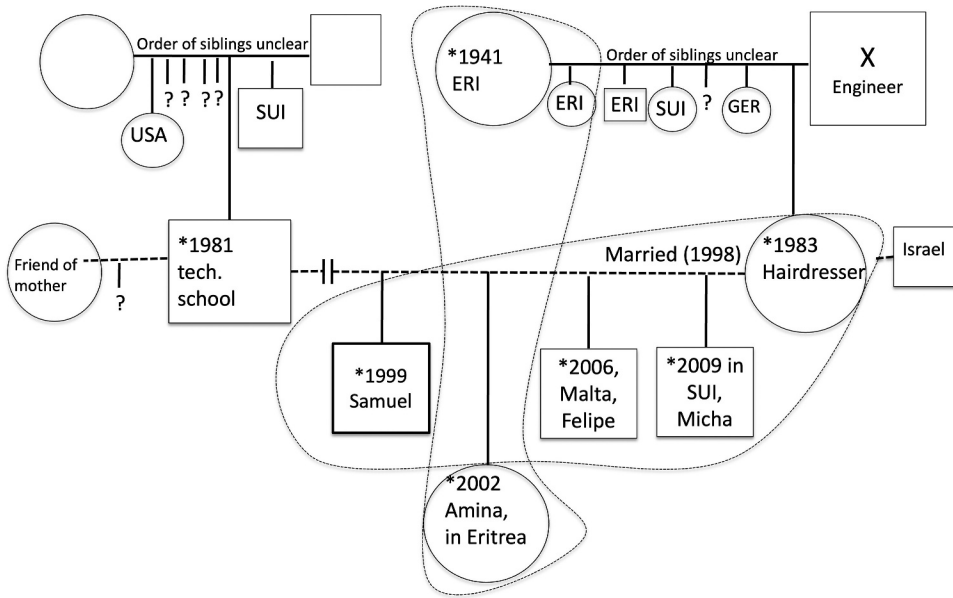


Figure 5. Family genogram of Samuel's family. SUI = Switzerland. USA = United States of America. ERI = Eritrea. circle: feminine person; square: masculine person; dotted circles: living in the same household; dotted line: former relationship.

born in Eritrea, either. Elsa's family relocated from Saudi Arabia to Eritrea's capital Asmara, where they lived for 7 years. Daniela and her family were living in Egypt for 4 years (without their father, who came to Switzerland 5 years before they moved to Egypt). Most of the other families or mothers came to Switzerland from Sudan directly (Thomas' mother traveled to Switzerland all alone, her children were born in Switzerland). When Elsa's mother came to Switzerland with her children, her husband chose to stay in Eritrea, where he was self-employed.

None of the interviewed families reported facing danger to life when they decided to leave Africa and come to Europe, nor were they prosecuted for religious or political reasons; possibly, the families denied their experiences as a survival strategy (Lanfranchi, 2015) or because they did not want to go into more detail here, saving them from reexperiencing their possible traumatizing memories or because they did not want to appear vulnerable to the interviewers.

Out of 18 children from five families, only two children were born in Eritrea and three were born in Switzerland. Nevertheless, all of them have Eritrean nationality, although most of them do not know much about that country. Taken together, there are many discontinuities in the family history, both in the vertical line over the generations and in the horizontal family biography (Figures 4 and 5). The horizontal discontinuity continues in Switzerland in terms of resettlement when the families are sent to several different asylum homes, always only for a few months before they finally are given an apartment of their own.

It is also remarkable that four out of five families did not plan to come to Switzerland but rather to another country (Elsa and Thomas: United Kingdom; Noah: Sweden; Samuel: Germany). Only Daniela's family explicitly refused opportunities to move to Australia or Canada because the father was already living in Switzerland and they intended to reunite the family (which unfortunately did not happen).

As already mentioned, the traditional patriarchal family structures in Eritrea are mostly destroyed by the long military incidents in the last decades, meaning that men were not living with their families for a long time and women took over responsibility for the whole family, sometimes with their parents helping them.

In Switzerland, we identified three functional equivalents for the traditional patriarchal societal structure: (1) the church (mostly a local Eritrean Christian congregation in Switzerland), (2) the Swiss social workers (some mothers called their social worker in charge "boss" when they mentioned them), and (3) the Eritrean diaspora (the government). In some families, no explicit equivalent was evident,

which seems to cause confusion and lack of orientation, possibly leading to a certain degree of stagnation (Noah).

Children build their own cultural identity

Only two of the 18 children in the interviewed families have lived in Eritrea themselves. They built their own identity in the host country (sometimes more than two host countries, when the journey to Switzerland took several years (Samuel)), leading to possibly hybrid identities (Graf & Thieme, 2016). Their social and academic integration at times was not easy. Daniela attended several schools but she was not able to keep up in 6th grade, so she was referred to special education. Elsa also had difficulties in her regular school; she reacted with psychological decompensation, was hospitalized, and was referred to a special education institution after recovery. Noah, age 3, has a remarkable developmental delay and is in early intervention therapy. The older sons in the families seem to be parentified; they take over the role of their absent fathers (Samuel and Elsa's older brother Simon) or they refuse to act as a substitute father (like Daniela's brother Elijah). As the children grow up and attend public school in Switzerland, they learn German much quicker and more fluently than their parents, which can be problematic in terms of different paces in integration. The children integrate faster but, their parents, who possibly do not understand the new culture, are responsible for them; this may lead to conflicts between children and parents (Yakhnich, 2016).

Discussion

The current study aimed to reveal familial predispositions for academic success and familial constellations in Eritrean families in Switzerland that could facilitate or impede integration into Swiss society. It is difficult for children with migration backgrounds to succeed within the Swiss academic system. The numbers of discrimination presented by Coradi Vellacott (2007) and Moser and Lanfranchi (2008) could be confirmed for Eritrean children in the 2015 data in our analyses. Similar findings regarding academic success were found in a recent comprehensive analysis of data from 1999 to 2016. In almost all categories, children from refugee countries in general experience more special education, more class repetitions, etc (Hättich & Lanfranchi, 2018).

Besides still existing barriers within the Swiss education system, there are familial transition processes that must be mastered by the family, although they might be exhausted, traumatized, and overwhelmed by their new tasks during and after the resettlement process. This significantly affects all family members, possibly resulting in children's school problems. When moving to a new country with a foreign culture, the entire family system is affected: relationships, gender balance, and responsibilities must be negotiated in a dynamic and balanced process to survive this critical phase of transition (Connell, 2005). An interview study on Kosovar families in the Zurich area (Fibbi & Truong, 2015) revealed that children who experience an authoritarian parenting style perform better in school than children who experience a permissive parenting style. Also, proactive parental activity correlates with children performing well, regardless of the mother's educational level; this finding can be supported by the qualitative part of the current study. It is surprising, though, that Eritrean children perform worse in Swiss schools compared to students who also fled from civil war countries like Syria, Afghanistan, or Iraq.

Two of the three families in our sample who arrived in Switzerland as a family had not yet mastered this challenging task to their own satisfaction (Samuel, Daniela) – their fathers left their wives and children or were expelled. Only Noah's father still lives with his family. In his family, he is the person with the best German language skills and holds the economic power (he is enrolled in a working program by the employment agency), allowing him to still act as the head of the family, whereas his wife only speaks German rudimentary and has no specific plans to get employed.

The possible reasons for the fathers who do not engage in family life much seem to be manifold and may be related to the migration process, the lack of peer support, and historical-societal factors. Many

Eritrean fathers have difficulties coping with the high pressure to find a job and earn enough money to meet their families' needs. Immigrants from Africa often are marginalized in Europe in many respects (Williams et al., 2013). Moreover, there is no male community of Eritreans in Switzerland, like there is for Albanians or Portuguese, where they could connect and support each other, and Eritrean fathers grew up in families with absent fathers and grandfathers during the long war. Some of them were serving in the long national service separated from their family, so role models for fatherhood are missing, although the Eritrean society is or was defined by a rather patriarchal family structure.

It is known from the literature that geographical mobility can be challenging, especially for fathers. Furstenberg (1988) summarized much of the literature on father disengagement and suggests that some fathers are pushed out of the family by geographical mobility and increased economic demands. In another study with Ethiopian fathers in Israel, they were engaged with their children as providers (when they could), guides, and mediators between the two cultures, and through recreational interaction with their children. Immigration provides fathers with an opportunity to reassess the meanings of fatherhood, but Ethiopian fathers in Israel described the impact of immigration on their fatherhood as mostly negative with only some positive elements (Roer-Strier et al., 2005). In their host country, fathers from Africa in Europe are challenged in their identity regarding masculinity, gender balance, and generational changes and often also face racism. They indicated experiencing difficult changes as fathers and found it difficult that the women became economically more powerful (Weine et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2013).

In Samuel's family, the mother has been working while the father served in the Eritrean national service, never allowing him to establish himself as the economic head of the family. When they came to Europe, he faced the problem of finding a job as an engineer, his original profession. Many fathers interviewed by Williams (ibid.) regretted the limited time the children were available to the fathers because of the high academic demands, but also because the fathers were tired after work (see also Yakhnich, 2016). In our Eritrean sample, at least Samuel's and Daniela's fathers, who are living in the vicinity of their children and are not employed at the moment, would possibly have enough time to spend with their children if they were able to find an arrangement with the mothers. Noah's father did not seem to be involved much with his two toddlers though. Taken together, it is not surprising that Eritrean fathers in Switzerland seem to struggle to find their new identity.

The mothers, finally in Switzerland after several previous resettlements, were mostly left alone in our sample as a result, bearing responsibility for the children's welfare, integration, health, and academic success. Jung et al. (2012) found that the mother's migration history, together with poverty status and maternal support, influence the extent to which cognitively stimulating activities are structured for young children. This is in line with our results regarding the mothers' important role. After all, the parents must deal with the children's changing behavior as they acculturate with the help of their Swiss peers in school, or with their non-Swiss peers, who already are better integrated into Swiss schools. At the same time, the experiences during their journey to Switzerland can allow young people to mature; they have learned to take responsibility and support their parents in taking care of younger siblings (Lubos, 2014).

Strengths and limitations

Current study was, to our knowledge, the first study on Eritrean refugee children and youth in Switzerland. Its strength is a twofold approach: the quantitative, descriptive approach and the qualitative, explorative approach.

The selection of families for the qualitative study followed a contrasting protocol, and a family is understood dialectically as an individuated general (Hildenbrand, 2005); still, the sample size of $N = 5$ families is rather small. Also, the families interviewed in the current study live in the same area (agglomeration of Zurich, Switzerland), which may limit the generalizability of our findings. Also, all families recruited for the qualitative part of the study were acquaintances of one Eritrean psychiatrist; this may have biased the recruitment and also involuntarily excluded other families, whose inclusion would have led to other results. Still, our results give first insights into the times difficult family history and specific situation of Eritreans in Switzerland over at least two generations.

Conclusion

Despite ongoing efforts of the Swiss government regarding schools and the social system, educational equality for Eritrean children has not yet been satisfactorily established. An important resource for children could be a mother who managed to maintain or build up a future orientation, regardless of her difficult biography, possibly unprocessed traumatic experiences and violence during her traveling to Switzerland, and frustrating, lengthy integration efforts, whereas isolation and discontinuity in the family history seem to weaken the families, their well-being and academic success. Further research is needed to uncover the remaining mechanisms that discriminate against Eritrean students in the Swiss school system and to support these first findings regarding family dynamics that facilitate integration and academic success for Eritrean children in Switzerland.

Note

1. All names are changed for anonymity.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

Data (anonymized) of the current study are available from the corresponding author, [S. B.] upon reasonable request.

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